

NOTAS

VIOLENCE AND FREEDOM IN THE POETRY OF JORGE RIECHMANN

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Recently several critics (Cañas, Villena, Mayhew) have dismissed much contemporary Spanish verse as unimaginative and imitative. These generalizations, however, ignore some important contributions by Spanish poets since the 1980's. Recently, both Provencio and Debicki have noted the originality and social commitment of many new authors, whose work compares favorably with that of poets of the 1950's. Geopolitical realities have played a role in raising those social concerns in recent poetry. Jorge Riechmann, a gifted poet with a social bent, has produced several books which examine recent historical events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gulf War. While the emerging free-market society promises freedom and prosperity, Riechmann holds that violence and repression are still the norm. As selected poems will show, in both form and imagery Riechmann destroys the illusion of individual liberty in contemporary society.

Riechmann came to prominence at the end of the 1980's with *Cuaderno de Berlín*, a collection of poetry, and *Poesía practicable*, a group of essays on poetics and aesthetics (Ortega 26). In the latter the poet speaks of a world where «ya no cabría divorcio entre poesía y existencia humana» (*Practicable* 17). Although Riechmann recalls the social realism of the 1940's by placing his poetry in a specific historical context, his work does not establish a one-to-one correspondence with the world, but rather a tangential, complex one, in which art prolongs, parallels and extends reality (Casa-

do 114). Nevertheless, the poet's crisis of conscience («la poesía del desconsuelo») (*Practicable* 19) and his eye on suffering destroy the illusion of beauty through art. Only upon reaching this nadir can the poet begin the work of transforming society through his words.

Cuaderno de Berlín (1989) contains works written during the poet's first stay in the German capital. Although titles, place names, and select phrases are from the German, the poet insists that the work has universal social and philosophical value: «no he escrito un libro *sobre* Berlín, sino uno *desde* esta ciudad» (7). Yet such images as the Berlin Wall and the Brandenburg Gate serve as reminders of the legacies of war and social systems. The poem «Roedora-», for example, displays destructive imagery in graphic form to describe the process by which life consumes the individual:

Roedora-
mente han cortado al cuerpo
toda posible retirada:
en otro cuerpo, en caricia
de brisa o agua o madera, en los pliegues
primeros del calor, en la contemplación.
No hay refugio...
.....
Guerra desolada y cruenta
contra toda materia,
devoración centrípeta, demente acoso
hasta el brocal de la nada.
Ante mí el día, pálido, vomitado
como sobre una mesa de operaciones (25).

The sibilants and occlusives emphasize the harsh nature of life as it devours the poet before his very eyes. Furthermore, the title itself, «Roedora-», represents a partially «eaten» word. At the same time, by playing on the reader's anxiety and desire for completion, the title heightens the poem's sense of immediacy. Thus the poem's graphic representation helps to illuminate the theme of destruction. Equally as significant is the presence of the material and corporeal at the expense of the transcendent and spiritual. To the speaker of the poem, life is a process by which the material is destroyed by the instruments of violence. This theme is reinforced by the inclusion of vocabulary which can have military applications: «retirada» and «brocal» (either the bushing on the mouth of a cannon or the rim of a shield). Moreover, the dawn, which commonly represents

newness and hope, is here depicted as merely an emesis. «Roedora-» is a graphic indirectment of the effects of violence on the individual.

Since much twentieth-century poetry has been written in the context of violence, individual authors have taken different paths, from the confrontational to the escapist. As Lawrence Ries has written in *Wolf Masks*, nearly every poet since the Second World War has had to deal with violence in forming his or her own poetic vision (4). Riechmann's poetics consider both the individual and the masses in facing the reality of Spain's and the world's violent past. Ortega points out that Riechmann situates his poetic ego beside, rather than on top of, the text, to show solidarity with the reader and to communicate more effectively without imposing his *yo* on the text (26).

Like his predecessors from the *novísimos* generation, Riechmann writes multilayered texts full of cultural, temporal, and topographical references. Yet unlike those same poets who seek to distance art from life, Riechmann uses these intertexts to connect the reader with the poem and to situate it historically. As Ortega has noted, the reader explores jointly with the poet the alternatives to cruelty (26). The poem «On Liberty» uses an intertextual reference (to Mill's essay) ironically to comment on the omnipresence of oppression:

Una voz ladra: recógete en un cubo,
y él lo hace.
La voz: recógete en un vaso,
y lo hace.
La voz: en un dedal,
y lo hace.
Y por no molestar, con cuello dócil
ejecuta el siguiente movimiento
antes de que la voz ladre de nuevo (40).

The theme that liberty is an illusion, that repression is the ultimate reality, is underscored by the gradual erosion of words: «una voz ladra» becomes «la voz» then finally disappears; «él» meets the same fate. At the end, the subject anticipates the command and reacts before «la voz» can order it. Furthermore, by fitting into increasingly small objects, from waste basket to glass and to thimble, the subject not only performs successively more difficult tasks but loses more and more of his mass, that is, by the end of the

poem he is nothing, both literally and figuratively. Thus the poem assails the notion of «liberty» as blind obedience to an impersonal, animalistic will (it barks its commands). In the end, «On Liberty», through its form and imagery, is a distressing critique of the notion of personal freedom.

For Riechmann the individual has been consumed by political and economic realities. The poet, then, shares that existence (the *yo* beside the audience) yet has the capacity to change it. This acknowledgement of social realities beside a vision for the future are seen in the poem «Besaré las heridas», also from *Cuaderno de Berlín*:

¿Con estas palabras
mancilladas
sangrientas
a lo largo de siglos
envilecidas
tuertas
escribir un poema?
¿Con tales hombres
cercenados
humilladores
carniceros
inaccesibles a sí mismos
fundar una ciudad?
Así será mi poema
así mi ciudad
y besaré las heridas
y no maquillaré las cicatrices (104).

As it reflects on human experience, the poem communicates both a sense of history and of hope. Moreover, the use of the future tense emphasizes the poetic speaker's confidence in his art, and the poem embodies his vision for a new world where the oppressed will be free. His work will not ignore the past by covering it up («maquillar las cicatrices»), but it will be soothing and reassuring («besar las heridas»). The many references to violence and lack of compassion («sangrientas», «humilladores», «inaccesibles a sí mismos») suggest a confrontation between poet and reality, followed by the reordering of reality based on a language that, without masking suffering, will console. In this poem at least, Riechmann's «poesía del desconsuelo» will ironically have a reassuring effect.

As we have seen, Riechmann's poetic voice stands with and by its reader, revealing injustice and violence and searching for ways to combat them. Antonio Ortega, however, cautions against strictly categorizing Riechmann as a «committed» social poet:

Si existe un término particularmente conflictivo para la comprensión de la poesía de Riechmann, ese podría ser el de compromiso. Compromiso entendido no sólo como síntoma de una implicación directa e ineludible entre poema y vida, entre conciencia ideológica y conciencia crítica, sino también como resultado del ejercicio moral de la voz desde o hacia una realidad geográfica y social concreta, pero que de ningún modo renuncia a dar cuenta de esos lugares de la existencia determinados por la felicidad y el amor (26).

While Riechmann's poetry is grounded in social and historical circumstance, it does not reduce itself to an ideological exercise but journeys outward to the moral dimensions of existence and seeks human intimacy. In fact, Riechmann's poetic voice wishes to «dance with the other», a concept echoed by the title of his recent work *Baila con un extranjero* (1994). Riechmann remains acutely conscious of the modern world yet is capable of turning from the past with an emphatic «no» and looking ahead (Casado 115).

Baila con un extranjero is rooted in events, personal and geopolitical, of the late 1980's and early 1990's, especially the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1991 Gulf War. On the one hand, his anti-militarism and sympathy for the oppressed continue to be prevalent; on the other, his skillful use of language in this work recalls such Generation of 1956 poets as Angel González and Gloria Fuertes. In particular, Fuertes' use of everyday and non-poetic language to provide unusual perspectives resonates in Riechmann.

The poem «Con los ojos abiertos» illustrates how the speaker communicates the immediacy of current events through direct language:

Quiero ver todo lo que va a venir.

Las guerras que seguirán
a la última de todas las guerras
Los crímenes que ennoblecerán
al próximo Benefactor de la Humanidad
y los crímenes que harán olvidar esos crímenes
Las palizas a los perros mudos

Las palizas a los negros mudos
Las palizas a las mujeres mudas:
yo he de ver todo eso

Los pilotos de la *US Air Force*
ven películas porno antes de bombardear Bagdad
y yo he de verlas

.....
Ya no hay tiempo
Por primera vez en la historia
SE HA TERMINADO EL TIEMPO
(de educar a los hijos
mejorar las ciudades
regalar un dedalico de amor a quienes sufren)
pero yo necesito ver lo que vendrá
después del tiempo (77-78).

Using stark imagery Riechmann criticizes humankind's failure to confront violence. Indeed, the heavy use of parallelism and anaphora in describing the violent acts have an anesthetizing effect on the reader. In the same way, the perpetrators of violence (e.g., the pilots) perform their acts of destruction mechanically and without regard to the human cost, as evidenced by their viewing the pornographic film with its degradation of the individual. Although the poetic speaker fears that time may have run out to end the suffering, he affirms that he must exist to witness the future. Poetic language is thus necessary, first for confronting violence, then proposing change. Again, through imagery and form, Riechmann has undermined a culture's indifference to suffering and invoked the power of art.

Riechmann places his poems in a realistic, historical perspective and uses colloquial language —reminiscent of earlier generations of Spanish social poets— to raise consciousness. His style differs from the intimate nature of much 1980's poetry; instead, by identifying with human suffering in a larger social context, it recalls the work of Vallejo, Hernández, or Neruda. *Baila con un extranjero* contains numerous poems grouped as «elogios» or «alabanzas», similar to Neruda's *Odas*. Many of these, far from praising the poet, are critical of his alienation from society. «Alabanza de la mañana» is one such example:

La lengua azul de la mañana
se me posa en la piel:
 escalofrío,
 tersa violencia.

Me detengo, me dejo interrogar. Cuánto tiempo desde la última vez que viví una mañana entera dentro de la verdad (44).

First, the poem's shape bears similarity to an arrowhead or bullet, suggesting that the speaker has been wounded by an act of violence. Second, the shocking cold of the morning reflects the speaker's alienation; he shudders both at the cold and at the lie in which he lives. The «tersa violencia», in this context, may be seen as the world's silence in response to the poet's search for truth amid its cold isolation. Silence, or inaction, is as harmful to humankind as overt violence. Indeed, this poem represents a crisis for the speaker, who must recognize his own failure to pursue truth, allow himself to question and be questioned, and learn to write liberating, socially conscious verse. While the militant aspect of his poetry condemns injustice and the lack of individual freedom, Riechmann goes a step further in proposing to dance with the other («un extranjero»). «¿Y entonces?» warns that this new relationship will advance cautiously:

Entonces, baila con un extranjero.
Escógelo al azar, bobo aliado
a quien le salen siempre bien las cosas.
Dolor habrá bastante,
siempre hay dolor latente
y aéreo
y expuesto:
no le tengas fe ahora,
eso vendrá después.
Y cuanto más oscura su certeza
más lento el baile (89).

As in other poems of Riechmann, the form enlightens the theme; here the spatial arrangement of the lines suggests the rhythm of a dance. The dance is representative of all art; as slowly as it may proceed, its ultimate goal is truth. The speaker must instruct his partner in human suffering, in the destructive violence that fills the world, in order to create a new one. Moreover, this new relationship with the other will advance cautiously and with much suspicion: «no le tengas fe ahora». The speaker does, however, reassure that trust will grow out of the relationship («eso vendrá des-

pués»). In effect, this poem summarizes the central theme of Riechmann's work: the use of art to construct a world based on truth and compassion.

Jorge Riechmann's poetry is indeed an indictment of the destructive forces of modern society. In both his poems and his writings about poetry, Riechmann views historical and social circumstance as essential. As the poems of *Cuaderno de Berlín* show, the speaker must confront the dehumanizing, militaristic character of the world before supplanting it with a new order. Both «Roedora» and «On Liberty» display a skillful use of form and imagery to render absurd the notion of individual freedom in contemporary society. In the same way, the pointed critiques of world events found in *Baila con un extranjero*, often communicated through unconventional imagery and non-poetic language, recognize that oppression, violence, and even death spring from humanity's isolation: one must get to know the other, «el extranjero», to promote change. Riechmann sees the world as it is and imagines the world as it could be. His work stands out for merging historical experience with artistic possibility.

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